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Bart Moeyaert

Belgian candidate for the

Hans Christian Andersen Award 2024 for authors

Nominated by IBBY-Belgium – Flemish branch

“We made a lot of books together and it was a great time. You were very young in those years, a boy, and I thought it was amazing what you did. You have a good take on human nature, and you are also someone who means people well. Stay who you are, Bart.”

Wolf Erlbruch in an audioclip during *De Grote Vriendelijke Podcast*
[*The Big Friendly Podcast*], 24 June 2019

“When I was artistic director of the Bath Children’s Literature Festival he was the first international author I invited, because I liked him so much and he is so great with audiences. He is very charismatic and very intelligent, and he’s good fun. His work appeals both to children and adults, which is explained by the simple fact that he writes so well, and so clearly. Good writing for young people does appeal to everyone. You see it in his book *Brothers* as well. It’s about family, and it says something about the human drama that everybody can relate to. His work is not just for children, it’s for all of us.”

David Almond on Bart Moeyaert, in: *27 Questions & Answers* (leaflet)

“I really have no idea, but the list would be quite long. Maybe these, among many others, not always or not only for the quality of their writing, but sometimes also for the interest or importance of their subject matter or the novelty of their form or insight into a culture: Peter Handke, Dag Solstad, Anne Carson, Scholastique Mukasonga, John Ashbery, Bart Moeyaert, George Saunders, Alice Munro, Gerbrand Bakker, Roddy Doyle, Nicholson Baker, Peter Bichsel, Ali Smith, Per Petterson (his *In the Wake*), Elena Ferrante (not so much the Naples tetralogy as her *Days of Abandonment*), Sjón representing Iceland. Ask me again in a few years.”

Lydia Davis, in an answer to the question ‘Which of your contemporaries will be read 100 years from now?’ in *Times Literary Supplement*,
14 November 2016

Biography

Bart Boudewijn Peter Moeyaert, the seventh out of seven boys, was born in Bruges on June 9th 1964, where he grew up, in a big house on the outskirts of town. In the Moeyaert family he tended to disappear a little. He was the kind of child that draws a lot, likes to cut and paste and to build tree- and other houses. He read a great deal and all sorts of books.



Young Bart in front of his family's home

When he was ten, Bart Moeyaert wrote his first longer story about a boy who's ill. At the age of eleven he started a first book about a secret society. And though becoming a writer was not among his ambitions because his father had told him writing was not an actual profession, he still took the step towards a publisher with his next book.

He made his debut (1983) with his autobiographical *Duet met valse noten* (*Duet out of tune*). The book was named the best Book of the Year in 1984 by the Belgian Children's and Young Adult Jury and has been translated into German, Catalan, Japanese and Hungarian. It turned out to be a bestseller that became a classic, entering its second life as a play as well as a musical.

Meanwhile, he studied Dutch, German, and history in Brussels.

Since 1995, Bart Moeyaert has made writing his profession. He has written screenplays and plays and he has published Dutch translations of German (by Christine Nöstlinger and Jürg Schubiger), English (by Carolyn Coman and Shaun Tan) and French books (by Chris Donner, Kitty Crowther and Frédéric Clement). For years he wrote articles about design for *De Standaard Magazine*, the cultural supplement of the renowned paper, *De Standaard*.

Several of his books, like *De Schepping* (*Creation*), *Het Paradijs* (*Paradise*) and *De Hemel* (*Heaven*) are projects where text, illustrations and music are combined. Performances and CDs accompany the books. Bart Moeyaert as the narrator, accompanied by renowned orchestras and performers, such as Janine Janssen, the Brussels Philharmonic and the Netherlands Wind Ensemble.

In 2003 the unpublished poems that Bart wrote over the course of many years were collected. Because of the broad success of this collection of poems and his ability to bring several arts together, he was named the Poet Laureate of the City of Antwerp 2006-2007.

From 2000 until 2021, Bart Moeyaert has been senior lecturer of Creative Writing at the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp, division Word and Stage. In 2007, he was made Doctor Honoris Causa for his work by the University of Antwerp. In 2014, Bart was appointed artistic director of the guest of honour program for the Frankfurter Buchmesse 2016, where the Netherlands and Flanders were joint guests of honour.

In 2019, he left Antwerp, the city where he had lived since 1986, and moved to the woods and tranquillity to the north of Antwerp.

That same year, he won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.



As a Poet's Laureate, Moeyaert wanted his poetry to reach as many people as possible, using – for example – beer mats

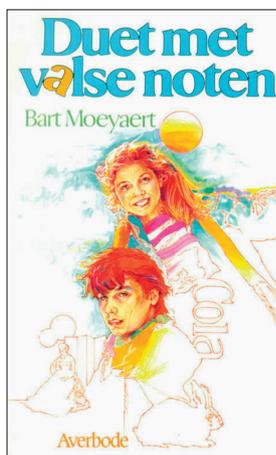
I think I am a good listener. I want to know what makes people tick. I also think I am open-minded. Those things go together. Arms open. The flipside of this is that my skin is very thin. At a bad moment, you can hurt me easily. I am sensitive to the darkness of life. If you are sad, so am I. That's a sensitivity that has always been there. I don't mind it being there either because it has also given me something in return. In the sense that I know more about feelings. Still, sometimes I envy people who seem to skip through life. At my best moments though, the two weeks when I am on holiday and the sun is shining, living is easy (laughs).

'The questions of Proust'

Interview with Bart Moeyaert by Ann Jooris,
in *De Morgen*, 4 April 2022

Statement on Moeyaert's contribution to literature for young people

Ever since his début in 1983 – at the age of 19 – Bart Moeyaert has been extremely popular in Flanders and the Netherlands, and over the past three decades his fame has also grown internationally. Moeyaert's first two books primarily caught the eye of the Children's Jury, but with *Suzanne Dantine* he established the reputation of an accomplished literary author that he has not lost since. From that moment on, most of Bart Moeyaert's books have been awarded with national prizes and international mentions and the long list of translations is growing fast as ever. Not only is he loved by critics, his books are also widely read among children, young adults, and adults.



Duet met valse noten, 1983



Duet met valse noten, 2023

Most of his work has been reprinted many times. His début *Duet met valse noten* has been reprinted for the 23rd time, *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* for the 12th time, *Broere* for the 13th time, *De Melkweg* and *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* for the 6th time. His latest book, *Morris*, which was first published in September 2022, has been reprinted for the 3rd time in January 2023. This is highly exceptional for children's books written in Dutch, especially since Moeyaert's work is so literary and rich.

But let's have a closer look at *Broere*, since this work characterizes Bart Moeyaert as an artist. First, the mere facts and figures show its popularity among critics and the general public: 13 reprints, translated in up to 13 languages, and awarded 4 times (in Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany). But then there's more – much more – to it.

Broere is a collection of short stories in which Bart Moeyaert gives us readers an image of what it felt like to be the youngest of seven brothers. With great wit and sensitivity, it appeals to a wide audience. Adults and children alike recognize themselves and their own lives in these honest and true stories. In *Broere* – as in his other work – Bart Moeyaert shows his eye for detail, which makes a personal story highly universal. Bart Moeyaert is a master of observation. Not only of what surrounds us and of what we do, but mainly of what lives inside every one of us and of what makes us act the way we do. He is not a writer of large, epic stories. He rather 'focuses on that one small given fact', as he said in an interview on *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry*.

Moreover, *Broere* shows how versatile an artist Bart Moeyaert is. *Broere* is a book, a CD, and a theatre show with accompanying songs and music, which he brings himself, live on stage. Bart Moeyaert does not limit himself, he stretches his boundaries, he is a man of many talents. He likes to make new stories to existing pieces of music: *De Schepping* (2004), *Het Paradijs* (2010) and *De Hemel* (2015) are for instance based on Haydn's oratoria. *Iemands lief* (2013), for an adult audience, is his take on *L'Histoire du Soldat* by Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz and Igor Stravinsky, and is written on request by violin-player Janine Jansen. All of these works he has brought on stage, accompanied by first class musicians.



Korean cover of
Olek schoot een beer

The books are illustrated by illustrators like the renowned Wolf Erlbruch or the young, talented Korneel Detailleur. Simultaneously with the publication of *Morris*, his latest book, theaters in Flanders showed a musical narration of the book.

This versatility and the diversity of genres and target groups for which he writes, has resulted in a wide echo of his work. Bart Moeyaert is a noted and celebrated author, even beyond the restricted circle of young readers and their educators.

We would like to point out one last element considering *Broere*, which extends to Bart Moeyaert's entire oeuvre. Moeyaert is always moving, maybe even forcing, himself forward, wanting to grow, to explore, to try things out. Originally, in 2002, *Broere* consisted of 31 stories. Since 2017, the book consists of 49 stories, plus small illustrations of Bart Moeyaert himself. Other books as well have had revised editions over the years, or editions with completely new illustrations (for instance *Suzanne Dantine*, *Jij en ik en alle andere kinderen*, *Wij waren klaar*). Bart Moeyaert is a searching artist, which he himself – as do we – considers to be a healthy attitude.



Ill. from *Mansoor*
by Annet Schaap

Bart Moeyaert looks – or better: his characters look at themselves and the world with an open and critical mind. They look around them and try to find their place in the world. Typical Moeyaert are these little hide-outs, where his (young) characters retreat to think things over or even to spy on adults surrounding them. Bianca in *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry*, has found herself a hole in a hedge to where she can retreat and find her peace. But there are just as well tables to hide under (as in *Broere*) or tables where children gather (as in *Mansoor*) in a sort of parallel – but still very much connected – universe to that of adults.

Bart Moeyaert's (young) characters think, observe, feel and find – but seldom in a straightforward way. You need to look beyond the surface and to read between the lines to fully understand them. Sturdiness often hides fear, and initially his weak, lonely or silent characters can come up with an amazing strength. Communication is hardly ever straightforward in Moeyaert's novels and short stories, and characters only gradually open up. The vulnerability that you see when they do is often deeply moving.

“Some sad things” happened in *Morris*' life, and they're not talked about, but his sorrow does surface. “He sobbed – just once. It was a sob that was left over from the night before. When you cry in secret, you never really cry everything out.”

The manual which Bianca, the main character in *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry*, claims to have is a beautiful metaphor for a lot of Moeyaert's characters: ‘According to my manual I may be very happy at times, though you won't see this on me. Whenever I come down the stairs, step by step and possibly slightly pounding, I may very well be extremely happy on the inside.’

Because of this, Bart Moeyaert's oeuvre often demands a form of slow reading, which is quite exceptional in children's literature. Only by taking your time and even rereading his books, you become utterly attentive to the richness of Bart Moeyaert's style, the complexity of his characters, and the notion that his

worldview is never purely black and white, but subtle and thoughtful. Even his most nasty or unsympathetic characters (as Betjeman in *Blote handen*, or Bianca's mum in *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry*) are human after all.

Whether it is in his novels, picture books, poems or short stories, Bart Moeyaert celebrates children's view of the world. This view is not an innocent view, but a truly openminded view. It consists of everything a person needs to grow: curiosity, eagerness, sensitivity and humor. Bart Moeyaert has a unique way of combining humor and seriousness, which makes his work ever so real. Through his characters, he features the world as it is. Complex. Often painful. But also playful. That is why he is such an outstanding author for children.

But there is more. The story of Bart Moeyaert does not end on the last page of his latest book. He is not only significant for Dutch children's literature as an author, but also as someone who has inspired an entire generation of aspiring authors, and as a spokesperson for qualitative children's literature. His credo is that children's literature and its authors, illustrators and readers deserve to be respected. With his solid literary reputation and personal charm, he has been able to influence the public debate on children's books. Above all, Bart Moeyaert's unique talent in combination with the energy he puts into national and international contacts has resulted into a lively interest for children's literature from authors, readers, and critics who before considered children's literature a minor literary genre. In this respect the entire Flemish scene of children's literature is greatly indebted to him.

Vanessa Joosen is Professor of English literature
and Children's literature at the University of Antwerp.

An Stessens is a critic of children's literature
and works at Iedereen Leest.

In this world, we are too often focused on the grand gestures and the loud voices. Instead, I prefer to consider one small morsel of thought at a time. The thoughts of a child are a splendid microcosm when you examine them under a microscope.

The child in the shadow

Interview with Bart Moeyaert

Marjolijn de Cocq.

In: *Het Parool*, 9 October 2018 (NL)

Interviews

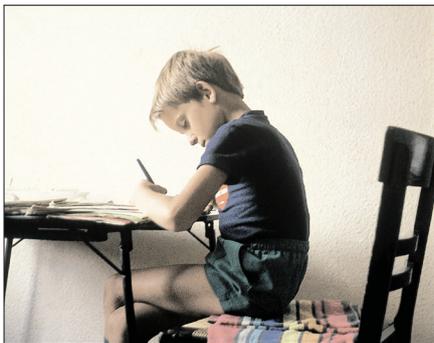
‘Learning from the best’: lessons in writing and poetry by Bart Moeyaert

- Bart Moeyaert (58)
- Writer since 1983
- Won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for his entire oeuvre in 2019
- Writer-in-residence at KU Leuven
- Nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award

He will be celebrating his fortieth anniversary as a writer, with a party that will kick off on Valentine’s Day and the reissue of his first book, about a first love. High time, we thought, to meet up with Bart Moeyaert, for a discussion about love in all its forms and what motivates him to write.

Has writing been your way of telling your story since childhood?

I think that this was already a thing, long before I could read or write. There are photos of our holidays at the seaside. I was six years old at the time. My brothers, family, and friends were outside on the beach in the sun, while I would sit inside, in my room, ‘writing’. I had learned how to form letters and how to spell out my name and I remember desperately longing for that instant when I would finally learn how to read and write, because I was convinced that that was the step you needed to belong. And it so happens that I learned to read and write in my first year of primary school, according to the *Met Vaardige Hand* [With a skilled hand] method, which my father, who was an inspector in primary education, had developed. I still find it difficult to ask myself how and when exactly I became a writer. I was raised with the idea that being a writer was not really a profession. You became a baker, or a forest ranger. Because I find it so difficult to pinpoint the exact moment, I am convinced that you often already have it in you, rather than becoming a writer out of nowhere. As a child,



Young Bart writing at his desk

I used to look at language in a different way, but I do remember that I already enjoyed the idea at the time of being able to fuel someone’s imagination with what I wrote. And that there were words that rhymed, which meant you could write songs. At age 11, I wrote a story. Just twelve pages, mind you, but it had chapters. I called it a book.

This year, you will be celebrating your 40th anniversary as a writer, with new books, reissues, and various festivities. Do you feel nostalgic when you look back on your career?

It doesn't make me feel nostalgic. I do however regret how incredibly much I missed during those first ten years. I was so overwhelmed by the world, I think, and so I was incredibly naïve. I spent my twenties in Brussels. A fantastic time, but I thought that Brussels was New York and so there are a bunch of essential things that I never had the opportunity to experience. I only have very vague memories of many of my life events at the time. People tell me that one of the first talks that I gave was before a huge audience, but I wouldn't be able to tell you what I said on that occasion. I am currently working on a very personal, autobiographical novel. I had to go delve in my archives, which are in the attic, in letters that I wrote and received, and diary excerpts. A lot happened in those early years, on a personal level, but I am just, gradually, starting to unravel the tangle now. Whereas I thought that I knew all there is to know about my life, I have come to realise that that is not the case. I found seven diaries from different periods, and what really struck me as peculiar, is that the entries often relate to my personal life. I cannot, however, find any information about where I used to hang out as a writer, and with which famous writers I had the privilege of sharing the stage, although I do remember it. It's as if I didn't feel the need to commit this to paper. Perhaps I thought that it was too obvious. I've always enjoyed collecting objects, as you can tell when you walk through my house. I have a cabinet full of objects that I've kept over the years. As long as I remember the story behind them, I keep them. The day that I no longer remember why I kept a shell I get rid of it.

What motivated you to write and has your motivation changed over the years?

Over the years, I have come to understand why I write. At times in which I am unable to write for a longer period or cannot find the peace and quiet I need to work on a book, I notice that I find life more difficult, or that I am more inclined to complain. This means I am 100% certain that writing completes me, makes me happy. It is something that I need to do. I don't write to understand myself better. When I start to write a book, I mainly talk about someone else, but by the end of the book, I realise that I have also processed something while writing it. My life and writing are inextricably linked. It's always been that way. Over the years, however, I've become more open, walls have come down. I have long thought that I needed to fulfil people's expectations about writers. I used to speak in a very affected drawl, it was awful (laughs)! It's only when I turned 30 that I was able to resign myself to the idea that life is what it is and that I started to give things or people the finger. It felt quite liberating.

Do you find it important to have a sounding board during or just after writing a book?

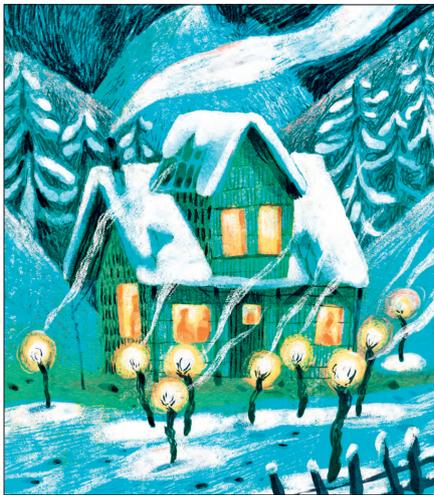
It's very much like cooking. I don't like people to look over my shoulder when I cook (smiles). Likewise, I like to keep what I write close to my heart. Jonathan, my partner, is my second reader, however. He excels at spotting inaccuracies. But before I let someone read what I've written, I want to be certain that I've

come far enough. That I can stay standing in the face of opposition. As soon as someone has given me feedback, I take it on board, but I don't blindly accept all suggestions.

Reading can inspire lots of emotions in readers. Does it matter to you that people find your books moving?

As a writer, I'm also my reader. I start to write, I continually reread what I wrote, from the start, and weave a story. By the time the story draws to its close, I will have reread the book hundreds of times, in a manner of speaking. I feel the rhythm, I know the narrator's voice inside and out, and can also spot my own jokes and the plot turns. I think that I gradually sense which emotions will rise to the surface, but it's not something that I tend to focus on while writing. I really enjoyed attending the premiere of *Morris*, my most recent book, as a narrative

concert. With (ed: former newsreader) Martine Tanghe as the reader, I didn't have to tell the story myself. This allowed me to observe people's reactions, as a spectator. I found it tremendously moving to see how children became absorbed in the story. The emotions that I evoke with a specific book are intricately related to my own personality. You can tell from my work when I'm going through a difficult period in my life. This also explains why *Morris* is one of my first books with a hopeful ending, which you put away with a sense of happiness after having read it. I've managed to break away from open endings in my books. Sometimes I like things to work out well. I allow myself to write a good ending. In the old days, I used to let my readers think about how the story ended. I thought that was more exciting. But it worked in this story, and the public seems to think it works. It's a nice feeling to know that that door opens at the end of the story, that it's light, warm, and fuzzy, and that there are pancakes waiting.



Inside it's light, warm, and fuzzy.
Ill. Sebastiaan van Doninck

Your book *Duet met valse noten* is being reissued. Do you think that you would write the same story differently, forty years later?

I don't think that I'd write it, full stop. I was the same age as Liselot and Lander, the protagonists, at the time. I had no idea what I was doing, I knew nothing about the world. During that period, I was also influenced by the time of day, less than I am now. In certain passages, you can really tell where I had spent the day. We discussed making some updates, introducing mobile phones in the story, for example, but ultimately, we decided against it. If I change one thing, I also change the book itself. And that is not something that I want to do. I noticed that young people today approach it in a different way, but they still read it. And a first love is a first love, regardless of the zeitgeist. When I read excerpts from the book, I remember who I was, the 19-year-old boy, with a little more gravitas than I have today.

Your anniversary celebrations kick off on 14 February. Are you someone who celebrates Valentine's Day?

I thought that it was a good date for the release of *Duet met valse noten*. First love and Valentine's Day are a good combo. That's all there's to it. As long as we celebrate love. This summer, *Dat alles over liefde gaat* will be published, a selection of my poems by the Dutch poet Ester Naomi Perquin. While discussing the themes, we realised that love in all its forms is a recurring theme in my work, with 'first love' as one of my favourites. I find it tremendously intriguing that we choose that one specific person at a given time in our lives. A lot of the things I learned about love over the years are expressed in my anthology of poems *Verzamel de liefde*. Why we make certain mistakes in a relationship and why it's so important to like yourself.

In the past two years, I received many more hand-written Christmas and birthday cards than I did in the past ten years. Have you also noticed that more and more people are writing again?

I mainly noticed that poetry has become more important. During the lockdowns I participated in *Dichter van wacht [Poet on call]*, an initiative of the non-profit organisation Verb(l)ind, where I spent several hours on stand-by next to my phone. People could ring me up, and I'd read a poem to them, after which we chat briefly. I often found the many stories about loneliness disconcerting. And I think that in a way books became our friends during this period. I don't know whether people are writing more. I try to explain, among others during the talks that I give, how writing can benefit you, by discussing my own personal career and reflecting on my formative years. I noticed that young adults especially go very quiet when I talk about my teenage years, the quest that I was on to find myself, the loneliness. But also when I talk about being famous and try to make them understand that that should not be your end goal. Always remember to be who you are. If your goal is to be published, you have missed the point.

How do you want to get our readers to write?

Writing is a form of self-care. Oh dear, what a word (laughs). Buy the most beautiful notebook, a good pen, and create your own place to write at home. When you feel the need to commit something to paper, just take the first step. And perhaps something will happen. I really believe this. Who knows, yesterday's first thought may put you on the way to something new tomorrow. And the three full pages of diary entries may prove especially valuable next year because they provide an insight. There's no need to set the bar high but give it a chance.

Do you think that this is something that we can teach ourselves? The passion for the written word?

You can, but it also comes with an assignment (laughs). If you find the book that you're reading too difficult, try to continue reading instead of putting it aside. Because otherwise you don't get to learn how to think differently. The more text you ingest, from the most random to the strangest texts, the more language you will have in your head and the better you will understand it. See it as a treat to read something unusual now and then. And don't give up too easily.

SHORT & CONCISE

When do you like to read?

In the evening, or better yet, at night in bed.

Which writer will you always be a fan of?

You should really read books by Johan Harstad and Cynan Jones!

Do you have a writing ritual?

I have noticed that, when I've just gotten out of bed, and I avoid my inbox, I can really focus on my work. Preferably over a cup of coffee. And in my own study.

Which music do you like to listen to when writing?

Perfect silence.

The most beautiful library in Belgium (or beyond)?

In Belgium, you must visit the Nottebohm room of the Conscience Heritage Library in Antwerp at least once. Abroad, I find Stockholm's Stadsbiblioteket breath-takingly beautiful. And obviously, I also love my own home library.

What do you love to do best when you're not writing?

To read, of course! And otherwise, you'll find me in my boots, out on the beach on a walk or pottering around the garden.



Detail of Bart's home library

BART'S BOOK TIPS

- *The Years*, Annie Ernaux
- *Winter recipes from the collective*, Louise Glück
- *The unseen*, Roy Jacobsen
- *The Copenhagen Trilogy: Childhood, Youth, Dependency*, Tove Ditlevse

Interview by Irene Schampaert

In: *Goed gevoel*, January 2023

Translated by Sandy Logan

‘The city locked me in, in the country I feel like a 12-year-old again’

After 32 years, Moeyaert has left the home port that he found so exciting for so many years. He no longer lives in the centre of Antwerp, having moved to the lush green town of Kalmthout. ‘I have finally understood what it takes to keep me healthy’.

‘NOBEL PRIZE’ WINNER

As the youngest of seven brothers, Bart Moeyaert (b. Bruges, 1964) soon developed a knack for reading between the lines and writing in an observant style. Audiences immediately embraced his debut, at age 19, titled *Duet met valse Noten*. His novels, poetry, and plays received a lot of praise and in 2019, he was even awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, the ‘Nobel Prize’ for children’s literature. This summer, he is quietly working on a new book.

Just as we find the right avenue in the most wonderful maze of trees, a robin hops out of a hedge. ‘Oh’, says Moeyaert, ‘I can’t work in the garden without having a bird edge closer, sizing me up like a little police officer and saying ‘well, well, and what are you up to?’. He laughs and uses the same, high-pitched comic tone of voice for the aquilegia that he recently moved: ‘I don’t like it here, move me, pretty please?’ (ed: in West Flemish dialect). She proceeded to thrive in her new spot, five metres from the old spot.’

This seems like a good metaphor for Moeyaert: the successful writer found new soil, one and a half years ago, 20 km from his original pad, that was more suited to his roots. ‘Jonathan (ed: his partner) and I wanted a garden and nature, which is why we immediately thought of Kalmthout. One day, the broker showed us something that resembled a Russian dacha, among the trees. That night, I lay awake dreaming of how I would decorate it. Until I realised: the house and garden are already so big in my mind that I will never get around to writing.’

The risk is equally real in this house, because Moeyaert has to contain his urge to start keeping rabbits or chickens, in addition to sowing flowers and planting potatoes. ‘The next few books will be slim volumes’, he laughs, ‘but then again, how could we resist these lovely, light rooms and this tranquil garden oasis?’.

TWELVE YEARS OLD AGAIN

They made the move just in time, it seems. ‘I don’t like using the word burnout, but it did come to mind. Now and then I’d have trouble remembering names, causing me to wonder whether the dementia that my parents suffered from was lurking in the wings, until I realised that my head was just too full. Like Jonathan, I’m the heart and soul of any party but at the same time, I also have long periods where I don’t want to see people or need stimuli. In my flat near Antwerp’s

Central Station, I had a lot of that, making it increasingly difficult to live a conscious, sensory life. The stimuli became background noise. The city that I had always found so exciting and liberating felt oppressive, it locked me in.'

Another ingredient in the mix of problems – the eternal traffic jams, the lack of silence – was the rudeness of the neighbourhood residents. 'If you walk in my way, I will run you over, if I have to'. Moreover, my pace of life had accelerated considerably since my responsibilities as a city poet and in my role at the Frankfurter Buchmesse 2016, meaning that I only felt this connection with the city any time I had the opportunity during the year to visit the contemporary art museum or the arthouse cinema. It forced me to ask myself: why am I still here?'

And so Jonathan and Bart considered buying a house at the seaside – the wide open vistas, the empty space – or in Bruges – back to his roots – but both options were trumped by Kalmthout's heath and forests. 'We go for a walk there almost daily and I instantly feel as if I am 12 years old again. It makes me happy to reconnect with the wide-eyed boy who loved to read and spend time outside that I used to be. The little boy who wanted to become a forest ranger, based on the romantic picture that stories used to paint of this career. I find myself browsing through the books that formed me back then, such as *Wij verkennen de natuur* [*We explore nature*], in which I found the name of the elegant toadstool that I found in the forest: hare's foot inkcap. It's not in any way a life-changing fact, but it gives me a sense of satisfaction, it gives me peace.'

BARTHA STEWART

Moeyaert strongly believes in the humus of childhood. 'The most defining years of my life were those in which I had a little parcel of my own in our garden, so tiny that I could have hoed with a fork. It made me very happy to think about how tall a plant would grow and what I could plant alongside it. I really enjoy puzzling over plant combos again.'

He is visibly satisfied when he shows me his 'little Japan', the borders near his study window, which are planted with delicate, star-shaped moss and young Japanese maples. Elsewhere around the house, in what will one day hopefully become a secret, English garden, lush dahlias grow. A variety from the 1930s, which he already grew on his city terrace. 'But the containers were just a surrogate for full soil.'

His sentences have a surprisingly apologetic undertone, as if he is slightly ashamed. 'Because it's all so diminutive. When I see the woodcock foraging around in the grass, or the monarda flowering – in that deliciously bright fuchsia – I always need to remind myself not to post it on Instagram, because I might just as well start writing 'Heidi on the heath'. I don't want to become Bartha Stewart. The one thing that I find philosophical is the many coal tits that fly to and fro from their nesting boxes, while I moan and groan about having too much work.' Life has become much busier, especially since he received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. But there is something else. 'Six months ago, I decided to quit my job as senior lecturer Creative Writing at the Royal Conservatoire. To make way for the new generation on



I don't want to become Bartha Stewart

the one hand, but also to be able to focus better on my own plans. I realise more than ever that I cannot get too caught up in the outside world, and in expectations. I am very vulnerable to the poison that is world news, so it behoves me to have antibodies. By staying close to myself, I also care for myself. Fortunately, I have finally understood what it takes to keep me healthy.’

‘I love being able to write here without earplugs, and that the stimuli are easier to control. This allows me to practice what Sylvain Tesson has so beautifully described in *The Snow Leopard*: “Observation was a method. It had to become a lifestyle.’

THE PEOPLE WHO REALLY MATTER

The living room doors are wide open. Arias waft outside almost daily. ‘Life in my flat was infinitely more hectic, I always felt like I had to do something functional. Here I feel more easily inclined to listen to different versions of *Macbeth* for example. I also made a mental note to book tickets for *Il Trittico* at De Munt and for the soprano Anna Netrebko in Zürich, because I’m scheduled to give a talk there. In the city I implicitly believed that culture was always there for the picking, here I make a conscious choice to indulge in it, just like I have started to be more aware of who really matters in our life.’

He still really needs his friends, he says. ‘Although I love living in seclusion – the painfully timid young that I used to be still lurks beneath the surface –, other people protect me from thinking too much and too deeply. That is why I’m not worried about becoming a hermit here. The worst thing that might happen is that I grow a beard that is too long or talk to the plants too often.’

His eyes gleam. This morning, at 7 am, he was walking among the flowers, coffee in hand, like his father used to do, on his daily walk through the garden, with his trusty pipe. ‘See that shrub there? That’s a *Rosengräfin Marie Henriette*, which some of my dear readers sent me when my mother died. Her name was Henriette.’

‘What I find even more disconcerting than the death of my parents is the realisation that they are even more under my skin than I thought. And that I have moved up a place in the generations. These past years, I also had to contend with an acrimonious divorce, I was pleasantly overwhelmed by the ALMA, and I moved in with Jonathan. In short, I’ve been through the wringer. Until two years ago, I used to say: ‘It’s all good, I can cope’. But now I sense that I need more time and space to process these past, heavy years. And now I have the opportunity to do it here.’

‘Oh wait, there’s something I absolutely want to show you’, he says while pointing at the seedlings of a fragile pink plant. ‘Great masterwort. How can you not love the complexity of its architecture? I bought them months ago, in small pots. You couldn’t see a thing in the soil but I was convinced that they would one day flower. It’s as if I have more trust here: yes, there are times when everything looks empty and barren, but one day everything will flower again.’

OUT OF THE BOX

Did you ever have a recurring dream?

‘I still dream that I have to go on stage, but that I can’t find the way to the stage or have forgotten every one of my lines. You would be right in thinking that such a fear of total failure may pass after so many years in the business. But all the applause also caused me to wonder: what if one day I’m no longer capable of doing this? But nature has also helped me in this respect because it allows me to accept the unpredictable, or the imperfect.’

When do you feel lonely?

‘Very rarely, thanks to Jonathan. In my previous relationships, I was often left in peace because my partner assumed that I ‘knew what I was doing’. But Jonathan was much less interested in Bart the Writer, he wanted to get to know Bart the Person. He has done his very best to give me a concussion, with great results (laughs). The only time I feel alone – a feeling that is less pervasive than loneliness - is when I can’t quite put in words what I’m doing when I’m working on a book. I just can’t seem to explain it, making it difficult to find a sounding board. But to be honest, I don’t really need one. My work has always been my cocoon, and I’m my own boss when it comes to my work.’

What do you know about your grandparents’ ancestors?

‘Very little. I have no regrets about my relationship with my parents. I spent lots of time with them, especially in recent years, but I regret the fact that I did not ask more questions about the past. I did ask my mother, but she did not want to dwell on the past. I never asked my father, because our relationship did not allow for this. He was always so difficult: ‘Why did you write that story? Why did you choose this format?’. But after his death, we found a drawer full of folders, titled Bart 1, Bart 2, Bart 3, etc. They were brimming with press cuttings and reviews, even letters that I had written when I was student in Brussels. He had annotated them, with comments that he never made during his lifetime, the smartass... On one bad review he had written: ‘Who does this man think that he is?’ It’s one of the few documents that I was brave enough to read. My mother’s diaries, which she gave me years ago, still feel like too much of a confrontation. But one day, I will probably read them all, with a writer’s mind, and tell the stories of my beloved relatives.’

Our guest always selects some of the ‘100 Questions’, a box full of surprising questions curated by *The School of Life*, a project set up by the philosopher Alain de Botton, among others.

Interview by Katrien Steyaert

In: *De Standaard*, 12 July 2021

Translated by Sandy Logan

After a lecture, I often get asked how we can ensure that children and young people read more. I continue to find it a curious question. Go home and set an example, I always think. Be genuine. If it doesn't work right away, maybe it will later. The people who got me into reading are not the ones who put a book in my hand and told me to read it with a raised finger. Because that's not how it works. Recently, at my new house in Kalmthout, I was talking to a gardener. He also told me about his ten-year-old son who does not like to read. Coincidentally, a week later, the man stopped by to discuss things further and his son was with him. I hand the boy a book of mine, but before I give it to him, I hold the cover under a ceiling light for a few seconds and only then do I pass it to him. [This book is *De baas van alles*, *The boss of everything*, printed with glow-in-the-dark ink.] I say that it does not matter, but that it is my book, that it glows in the dark, and that it is up to him to decide what he does with it, but that I would like it if he did something with it. By which I mean: do not see enticing to read as an assignment. The gardener told me yesterday that his son is now reading the book to his sister. Isn't that great?

'I'm really being listened to now'

Interview with Bart Moeyaert by Marnix Verplancke,
in *De Standaard*, 25 January 2020

List of awards and distinctions

Duet met valse noten

- Best Book of the Year by the Flemish Children and Youth Jury 1984 (B)

Suzanne Dantine

- Honourable mention four-yearly Charlotte Köhler Grant 1990 (NL)

Een kuil om in te wonen

- Boekenwelp 1991 (B)

Kus me

- Boekenleeuw 1992 (B)
- Provinciale Prijs West-Vlaanderen 1993 (B)
- Antwerp Regional Award 1993 (B)
- IBBY Honorlist Hans Christian Andersen Award 1994
- Eule des Monats 1993 (DE)
- Shortlist Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis 1994 (DE)
- White Ravens 1994 (DE)

Voor altijd, altijd

- Boekenwelp 1993 (B)
- Vlag en wimpel 1993 (NL)
- Shortlist Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis 1995 (DE)

Blote handen

- Boekenleeuw 1996 (B)
- Shortlist Nomination for Gouden Uil 1996 (B)
- Zilveren Griffel 1996 (NL)
- Auszeichnung Fällt aus dem Rahmen January 1998 (DE)
- Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis 1998 (DE)
- Three-Yearly Vlaamse Cultuurprijs 1998 (B)
- Norske Oversetterpremien 1999 (NO)
- Interprovinciale prijs voor Letterkunde 1999 (B)

Afrika achter het hek

- Samstorfer Children's Book Award 2000 (DE)
- Zilveren Penseel 1996 for the illustrations by Anna Höglund (NL)

Mansoor, of hoe we Stina bijna doodkregen

- Shortlist Nomination for Gouden Uil 1998 (B)
- Boekenwelp 1997 (B)

Wespennest

- Luchs awarded by Die Zeit & Radio Bremen (DE)

De brief die Rosie vond

- Longlist Nomination for Gouden Uil 1998 (B)
- Boekenwelp 1998 (B)
- Boekenpauw 1998 for the illustrations by André Sollie (B)

Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen

- Boekenleeuw 2000 (B)
- Shortlist Nomination for Gouden Uil 2000 (B)
- Eule des Monats 2002 (DE)
- Auszeichnung Fällt aus dem Rahmen 2002 (DE)
- Prix Libbylit 2006 (meilleur roman belge) (B)

Rover, dronkeman

- Kaas & Kappes Dramatiker Preis 2001 (DE)

Broere

- Woutertje Pieterse Prijs 2001 (NL)
- Longlist Nomination for the Gouden Uil 2002 (B)
- Jugendbuch des Monats vom Deutschen Akademie 2007 (DE)
- Luchs awarded by Die Zeit & Radio Bremen 2006 (DE)
- Die Sieben Besten 2006 (DE)

Luna van de boom

- De Gouden Uil 2001 (B)

Het beest heet Mona

- Zilveren Griffel 2002 (NL)

Drie zusters

- 1000 Watt Theaterprijs 2004 (B/NL)

Dani Bennoni

- Boekenwelp 2005 (B)
- Nienke van Hichtumprijs 2005 (NL)

De Schepping

- Boekenleeuw 2004 (B)
- Zilveren Griffel 2004 (NL)
- Zilveren Penseel 2004 (NL) for the illustrations by Wolf Erlbruch
- Luchs awarded by Die Zeit & Radio Bremen 2004 (DE)
- Die Sieben Besten 2003 (DE)
- Shortlist Gouden Uil 2004 (B)
- Gouden Uil Prijs jonge Lezer 2004 (B)

Olek schoot een beer

- Die Sieben Besten 2006 (DE)

De baas van alles

- White Ravens 2008 (DE)

Durf voor drie

- Luchs awarded by Die Zeit & Radio Bremen 2008 (DE)
- Die Sieben Besten 2008 (DE)
- Hörbuch Bestenliste 2009 (DE)
- Shortlist Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis 2009 (DE)

Het Paradijs

- Longlist Dioraphte Jongerenliteratuur Prijs 2011 (B-NL)
- Prijs Letterkunde van de Provincie West-Vlaanderen 2013 (B)

De Melkweg

- Boekenleeuw 2012 (B)
- Prijs Letterkunde van de Provincie West-Vlaanderen 2013 (B)
- Finalist Premio Letteratura Ragazzi Cento 2018 (I)

Wie klopt daar?

- Boekenleeuw 2013 (B)
- Zilveren Griffel 2013 (NL)
- IBBY Honour List 2014 (B)

Jij en ik en alle andere kinderen

- Beste 7 Bücher für Junge Leser (DE)
- Buch des Monats 2016 (AT)

De gans en zijn broer

- Shortlist Gouden Lijst 2015 (NL)
- Shortlist Woutertje Pieterse Prijs 2015 (NL)

De Hemel

- Shortlist Gouden Lijst 2016 (NL)
- Shortlist Woutertje Pieterse Prijs 2016 (NL)

Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry

- Zilveren Griffel 2019 (NL)
- Die Besten 7, März 2020 (DE)
- Shortlist Premio Andersen 2020 (I)
- Shortlist Oversetterprisen 2021 (NO)
- Selection Katholischer Kinder- und Jugendliteraturpreis (DE)

Morris

- Shortlist Boon Jeugdliteratuur 2023 (B)

Complete Works

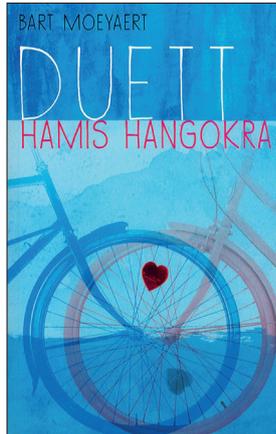
- Several nominations for the Hans Christian Andersen Award – listed as a finalist in 2002, 2012, 2020
- Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, 2019 (S)

For a long time, I faithfully went every year to the Bologna children's book fair and to the Buchmesse in Frankfurt. Just to be there and to feel the depression of the third day. How many books are here, I then asked myself. What am I adding to that? Then I shook off that gloom and started writing a new book. The jury report for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award summarised my oeuvre in five words: standing up for the loner. That touched me beyond measure. I knew that and I did not know that at the same time. Suddenly I am aware that my characters, who are sometimes said to be so passive, are actually fighting for something.

Children are no angels and childhood isn't necessarily beautiful
Interview with Bart Moeyaert by Pjotr van Lenteren,
in *De Volkskrant*, 25 May 2019

Complete bibliography with translated editions (year, *title*, publisher, country)

Not included: non-fiction, prose and poetry for adults



Hungarian cover of
Duet met valse noten

- 1983, *Duet met valse noten* [*Duet out of tune*], Altiora, B
 1998, *Leander, Liselot und die Liebe*, Peter Hammer, DE
 1998, (Japanese), Kumon, J
 2001, *Duet desafinat*, Columna, E (Catalan)
 2014, *Duett hannis hangokra*, Pagony, H

- 1986, *Terug naar Af* [*Back to square one*], Altiora, B
 2002, *Bocciato*, Fabbri/Bompiani, I
 2004, *Cateado*, Edelvives, E

- 1989, *Mijn tuin uit!* [*Get out of my garden!*], Zwijsen, NL – Ill. Annemie Heymans

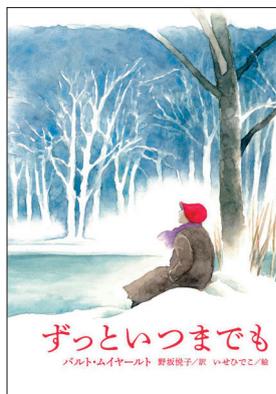
- 1989, *Een klap is geen kus* [*A Kick is Not a Kiss*], Zwijsen, NL – Ill. Annet Schaap
 (since 2013 part of ‘*Jij en ik en alle andere kinderen*’)

- 1989, *Het boek van Niete* [*Niete’s book*], Altiora, B – Ill. Joke van Eyck (since 2013
 part of ‘*Jij en ik en alle andere kinderen*’)

- 1989, *Suzanne Dantine*, Altiora, B
 New edition, new title: 1997, *Wespennest*, Querido, NL

- 1990, *Een kuil om in te wonen* [*A Hole to Live In*], Zwijsen, NL (Since 2007 part
 of ‘*Durf voor drie*’)

- 1991, *Kus me* [*Kiss Me*], Altiora, B
 1993, *Küss mich*, Ravensburger, DE
 1994, *Kyss meg*, Aschehoug Norsk Forlag, N
 1996, *Me-dà um Beijo*, Ediciones Ediouro, BR
 1998, *Baciami*, Fabbri/Bompiani, I
 2000, *Filisé me*, Patakis, GR
 2003, (Thai), Image Publishing, T
 2008, *Embrasse-moi*, Rouergue, F



Japanese cover of
Voor altijd, altijd

- 1991, *Een boot in de mist* [*A Boat in the Fog*], Zwijsen, NL – Ill. Juliette de Wit

- 1992, *Voor altijd, altijd* [*Forever, always*], Zwijsen, NL (Since 2008 part of
Missen is moeilijk)

- 1994, *Wo ist Mia?*, Ravensburger Verlag, DE
 2022, (Japanese), Shogakukan, J

1993, *Echt weg is niet zo ver* [*Really gone is not that far*], Zwijsen, NL (Since 2008 part of *Missen is moeilijk*)

1993, *De man in de maan* [*The Man in the Moon*], Zwijsen, NL – Ill. Annemie Heymans

1995, *Die steeg van ons* [*That Alley of Ours*]. Zwijsen, NL

2010, *Du bist da, du bist fort*, Hanser, G (compilation of *Voor altijd, altijd*, *Echt weg is niet zo ver* en *Die steeg van ons*.)

1995, *Afrika achter het hek* [*Africa Behind the Fence*], Querido, NL – Ill. Anna Höglund

1995, *Afrika bakom staketet*, Bonnier Carlssen, S

1995, *Afrika bakenfor gjerdet*, Bonnier Carlssen, N

1995, *Afrika hinter dem Zaun*, Ravensburger, DE

1999, *Afrika hinter dem Zaun*, Carlsen Verlag, DE

2001, (Japanese), Holp Shuppan, J

2008, (Korean), BIR, ROK

1995, *Blote handen* [*Bare Hands*], Querido, NL

1997, *Blosse Hände*, Carlsen Verlag, DE

1997, *A mani nude*, Fabbri/Bompiani, I

1997, *Gole roke*, Mladinska Knjiga, SLO

1998, *Bare hands*, Front Street, USA

1998, *Med bare hendene*, Aschehoug Norsk Forlag, N

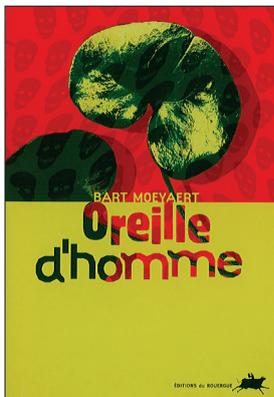
1999, *A mains nues*, Editions du Seuil, F

2000, *Bare naever*, Fremad, DK

2006, *Manos desnudas*, Edelvives, E

2010, (Korean), Nangyala Publishing, ROK

2020, *Gołymi rękami*, Dwie Siostry, P



French cover of Mansoor

1996, *Mansoor, of hoe we Stina bijna doodkregen* [*Hazelwort, Or How We Nearly Killed Stina*], Querido, NL

1999, *Oreille d'homme*, Ed. du Rouergue, F

2018, *Mangia la foglia*, Sinnos, I

1997, *De brief die Rosie vond* [*The Letter Rosie Found*], Standaard Uitgeverij, B – Ill. André Sollié

1997, *Wespennest* [*Hornet's Nest*], Querido, NL

revised edition of *Suzanne Dantine* from 1989

2000, *Im Wespennest*, Beltz & Gelberg, DE

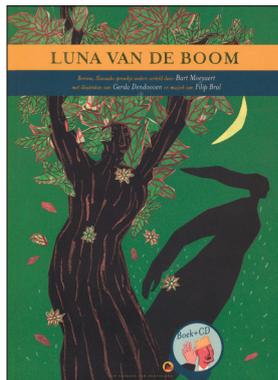
2000, *Hornet's Nest*, Front Street, USA

2005, *Nid de Guêpes*, Ed. du Rouergue, F

1999, *Grote oma's* [*Tall Grannies*], Querido, NL - Ill. Kitty Crowther

1999, *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen [It's Love We Don't Understand]*, Querido, NL

- 2001, *Es ist die Liebe die wir nicht begreifen*, Beltz & Gelberg, DE
- 2001, *Kärleken man inte förstar*, Rabèn & Sjögren, S
- 2001, *Det er kaerligheden vi ikke forstar*, Fremad, DK
- 2001, *It is Love We Don't Understand*, Front Street, USA
- 2001, *È l'amore che non comprendiamo*, Salani, I
- 2005, *C'est l'amour que nous ne comprenons pas*, Ed. du Rouergue, F
- 2019, *El amor que nos entendemos*, SM, MEX
- 2021, *Ljubav je ta koju ne razumemo*, Odiseja, SRB



Luna van de boom

2000, *Luna van de boom [Luna from the Tree]*, Pantalone, B – Ill. Gerda Dendooven, comp. Filip Bral.

2003, *Le conte de Luna*, Autrement, F

2000, *Broere (de oudste, de stilste, de echtste, de verste, de liefste, de snelste en ik) [Brother (the Oldest, the Quietest, the Truest, the Farthest, the Loveliest, the Fastest, and Me)]*, Querido, NL

- 2002, *Broere*, Fremad, DK
- 2005, *Brothers*, Front Street, USA
- 2006, *Sieben Brüder*, Hanser, DE
- 2008, *Frères*, Ed. Du Rouergue, F
- 2010, (Korean) Joong Ang, ROK
- 2011, *Fratelli*, Rizzoli, I
- 2011, *Broers*, Protea Boekhuis, ZA
- 2017, *[Brat'ja]*, Samokat, RUS
- 2020, *Hermanos*, SM, MEX
- 2020, *Brāļi. Vecākais, klusākais, īstākais, tālākais, mīļākais, ātrākais un es*, Petergailis, LV
- 2021, *[Brađa: najstariji, najtisi, najosobeniji, najdanolji, najdrazi, najbrzi, i ja]*, Obodsko Slovo, MNE
- 2021, *Bratje. Najstarejši, najtišji, najikrenejši, najskrivnostnejši, najnežnejši, najhitrejši in jaz*, KUD Sodobnost International, SLO
- 2022, *Braca*, Ibis Grafica, HR

2000, *Rover, dronkeman [Robber, drunkard]* (play), Querido, NL

2000, *Raüberlieder sind für alle da*, Verlag der Autoren, DE

2001, *Ongelikt [Boorish]* (play), Querido, NL – Based on the works of William Shakespeare

2001, *Bremen is niet ver [Bremen is not far]* (play), HetPaleis, B

2001, *Het beest heet Mona [The Beast is Called Mona]*, Zwijsen, NL (Since 2007 part of 'Durf voor drie')

2002, *Mijn hart is een pinguin [My heart is a penguin]*, Pantalone, B – Ill. Chiharu Sakazaki

2003, *Verzamel de liefde (poetry) [Gathered Love]*, Querido, NL

2003, *De Schepping [The Creation]*, Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch

2003, *Am Anfang*, Peter Hammer, DE

2003, *Moi, Dieu et la Création*, Ed. du Rouergue, F

2003, (Korean), Marubol, ROK

2005, *Stworzenie*, Hokus Pokus, P

2006, *A criação*, Cosac Naify, BR

2006, *La Creación*, Barbara Fiore Editora, E

2006, *La creazione*, Edizioni e/o, I

2018, *La Création*, La Joie de Lire, CH

2004, *Dani Bennoni*, Querido, NL

2008, *Dani Bennoni*, Front Street, USA

2004, *Drie zusters [Three sisters]*, Afijn, B – Photo's: Koen Broos, based on the works of Anton Tsjechov (play)

2006, *Olek schoot een beer [Olek has shot a bear]*, Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch

2006, *Olek schoss einen Bären*, Hammer, DE

2007, *Olek a tué un ours*, Ed. du Rouergue, F

2008, (Korean), Woongjin, ROK

2008, *Il viaje de Olek*, Barbara Fiore, E

2007, *De baas van alles [The boss of everything]*, Manteau, B – Ill. Katrien Matthys

2008, *Le maître de tout*, Ed. du Rouergue, F

2011, *Wer ist hier der Chef?*, Hanser, DE

2007, *Durf voor drie [Courage for three]*, Querido, NL (compilation of *De brief die Rosie vond*, *Een kuil om in te wonen* en *Het beest heet Mona.*) – Ill. Rotraut Susanne Berner

2007, *Mut für drei*, Hanser, DE

2008, (Korean), Sallam Books, ROK

2009, *Coraggio per tre*, Rizzoli, I

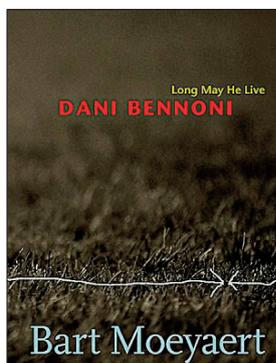
2010, *Atreveix-te amb tres*, Cruïlla, E (Catalan)

2008, *Missen is moeilijk [Missing is hard]*, Querido, NL – Ill. Annemie Heymans (Compilation of *Voor altijd, altijd*, *Echt weg is niet zo ver* en *Die steeg van ons*)

2010, *Du bist da, du bist fort*, Hanser, DE

2010, *Het Paradijs [Paradise]*, Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch

2011, *El Paraíso*, Barbara Fiore, E



US cover of Dani Bennoni



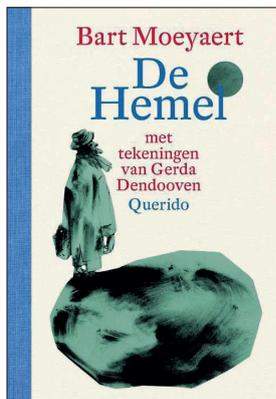
German cover of
Missen is moeilijk

- 2011, *De Melkweg [The Milky Way]*, Querido, NL
 2012, *La rue des Etoiles*, Ed. du Rouergue, F
 2013, *Mælkevejen*, Turbine Forlaget, DK
 2013, (Macedonian), Vermilion, NMK
 2013, *Hinter der Milchstrasse*, Hanser, DE
 2015, [*Wie qiang shang de xiao tian*] (Complex Chinese), Global Kids Book, TW
 2016, (Chinese), Nanfang Publishing House, CN
 2016, *Il club della via lattea*, Sinnos, I
 2020, *Melkweg*, Protea, SA
 2021, [*Mliječni put*], Obodsko Slovo, MNE

2012, *Wie klopt daar [Knock Knock, who's there?]*, De Eenhoorn, B –
 Ill. Gerda Dendooven

- 2013, *Jij en ik en alle andere kinderen [You and Me and All the Other Children]*,
 Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch, Rotraut Susanne Berner, Gerda Dendooven,
 Marije Tolman, André Sollie en Korneel Detaillieur
 2016, *Du und Ich und alle anderen Kinder. Gesammelte Geschichten
 und Kindergedichte*, Hanser, DE

- 2014, *De gans en zijn broer [The Goose and its Brother]*, Querido, NL –
 Ill. Gerda Dendooven
 2018, *L'oie et son frère*, La Joie de Lire, CH
 2020, *L'oca e suo fratello*, Sinnos, I
 2021, [*Gusan i njegov brat*], Obodsko Slovo, MNE



2015, *De Hemel [Heaven]*, Querido, NL – Ill. Gerda Dendooven

2018, *We waren klaar : verzameld theater [We were ready: a collection of plays]*. –
 Bebuquin, BE – Ill. Isabelle Vandenabeele

- 2018, *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry [Everyone's Sorry Nowadays]*, Querido, NL
 2018, *Alla är ledsna nuförtiden*, Gilla Böcker, S
 2019, *Bianca. Nessuno chiede scusa per caso*, Sinnos, I
 2019, *Tagad visus sauc Sorry*, Petergailis, LV
 2020, *Bianca*, Hanser, DE
 2020, *Nå heter alle Sorry*, Cappelen Dam, N
 2020, *Bugünlerde Herkesin Adı Affedersin*, Can Çocuk, TR
 2021, *Tänapäeval on kõigi nimi Sorry*, Päike ja Pilv, EST
 2021, *Sorry*, La Joie des Livres, CH

2020, *Het hele leven [The whole life]*, Querido, NL. – Ill. Peter Vanden Ende
 New edition of *De Schepping*, *Het Paradijs*, and *De Hemel*

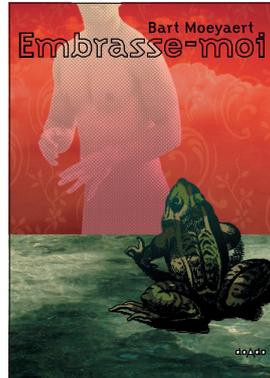
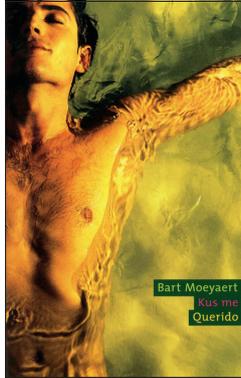
- 2022, *Morris, de jongen die de hond vond [Morris, the boy who found the dog]*,
 Querido, NL – Ill. Sebastiaan van Doninck
 2022, *Morris*, Sinnos, I

What do you do between two books?

After I've finished a book, I'm euphoric for three and a half minutes. As I'm tidying up, clearing the book out of my study bit by bit, I keep smiling. That cheerfulness is just a pretence. The mourning period has begun long ago. Saying goodbye to a book also means saying goodbye to a phase of my life. The publisher and I discuss the design; we look forward to the publication. Perhaps I manage to do almost nothing for a few days – there's no such thing as doing nothing. When the first interview happens, I call the book that I finished six months ago 'my new book'. But at that moment I'm quietly working on something that really is new – it's a strange phenomenon.

In: *27 questions & answers* (leaflet)

Ten most important titles

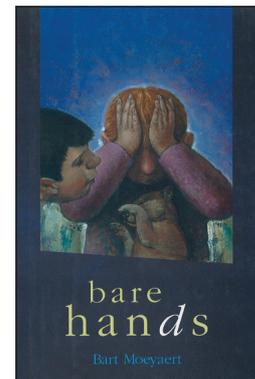
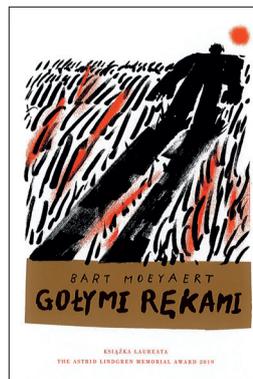


1991, *Kus me* [*Kiss Me*], Altiora, B

Four young people meet each other on a hot summer afternoon at a lake. What starts as an innocent game gets out of hand.

“Young author Bart Moeyaert is a promising talent in Flanders. His language is beautiful, baroque but sharp.”

TROUW (NL)



1995, *Blote handen* [*Bare Hands*], Querido, NL

On New Year's eve Ward faces the difficult decision whether or not he will tolerate the hateful Betjeman in his life, especially after all that's gone wrong already.

“You'll read the whole thing with a knot in your stomach, because it is so sad, because the writing is so breathtakingly exciting, and because you know that such things really do happen in life.”

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER (NL)



1999, *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen [It's Love We Don't Understand]*, Querido, NL

Three sketches of a family without a father, a family where everybody is, in their own way, looking for love.

“If you cannot talk about something, it is better to keep silent. If you’re going to write about it then do so as suggestively as Moeyaert.”

DE VOLKSKRANT (NL)



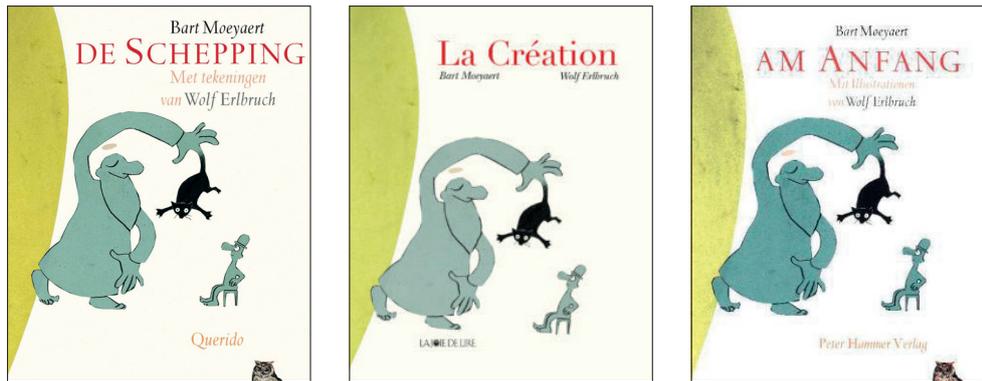
2000, *Broere (de oudste, de stilste, de echtste, de verste, de liefste, de snelste en ik)*

[*Brother (the Oldest, the Quietest, the Truest, the Farthest, the Loveliest, the Fastest, and Me)*], Querido, NL

Thirty-one stories that together make up one year in Bart Moeyaert’s childhood, featuring ‘our father’, ‘our mother’, and of course all of the seven brothers ‘the oldest, the quietest, the truest, the farthest, the loveliest, the fastest and me’.

“Moeyaert proves without doubt that even a happy childhood can be a goldmine for a writer.”

DE VOLKSKRANT (NL)



2003, *De Schepping* [*The Creation*], Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch

A little man watches how God creates the world and gradually finds his place in this creation.

“Moeyaert and Erlbruch form an extraordinarily fine symbiosis.”

DIE ZEIT (G)



2007, *Durf voor drie* [*Courage for three*], Querido, NL (compilation of *De brief die Rosie vond*, *Een kuil om in te wonen* en *Het beest heet Mona.*) – Ill. Rotraut Susanne Berner

Three stories for early readers about courage: Rosie has to curb her curiosity; Tom decides to stand up for himself, for the first time; and a couple of children tackle bully Mona.

“Cleverly told stories, extremely simple in language, style and structure, but Moeyaert explores subtly the relationships between the characters, and especially those between the adult and the child.”

LEESIDEE (B)



2011, *De Melkweg [The Milky Way]*, Querido, NL

Three children gather every day on top of a wall at the end of their street, viewing the street and the old woman walking her dog. Days are passing by slowly, until one of the children places a bet.

“Moeyaert is a master of the short track: the characters come alive in just a few pen strokes. Deceptive simplicity is his trademark.”

DE STANDAARD (B)



2014, *De gans en zijn broer [The Goose and its Brother]*, Querido, NL – III. Gerda Dendooven

Life at the farm is difficult, and the goose and his brother are overcome by melancholic thoughts. Why does the world constantly change, how do you ask for forgiveness, and if the farmer's wife leaves, does she ever return?

“As always, Moeyaert shows himself to be a master of suggestion”

TROUW (NL)

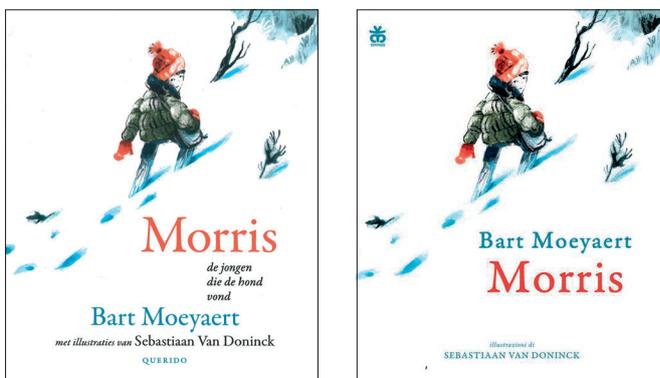


2018, *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* [Everyone's Sorry Nowadays], Querido, NL

The story on one afternoon in the life of 12 year old Bianca, who tries to get a grip on her disturbed family relations and on herself.

“An exceptionally intimate and intense novel. An encounter you’ll never forget.”

TZUM (NL AND B)



2022, *Morris* [Morris], Querido, NL – Ill. Sebastiaan Van Doninck

For the hundredth time Morris climbs the mountain to bring Grandma’s escaped dog home safely. High in the snow he meets a boy who deals very differently with all that life metes out to him.

“His clever text, full of measured but multi-layered sentences, and Sebastiaan Van Doninck’s handsome colour illustrations, are a match made in heaven.”

DE MORGEN (B)

Last year, there was quite a stir because you allegedly said that a teacher who does not read children's books is a bad teacher.

"I got a lot of angry reactions from teachers at the time, but also a lot of positive ones, maybe even more of those. The unfortunate thing about it was that my words were condensed into a quote, but I don't regret it. Finally, there was debate. If you say something moderate and well-behaved, no one pays attention to you. Children's book writers are always nice. But when you curse, people get startled, and discussion ensues. My point is that when you are expected to teach children something, you must know them inside out. You must understand and follow children's culture. In that respect, I think we are too easily satisfied today."

'I'm really being listened to now'

Interview with Bart Moeyaert by Marnix Verplancke,
in *De Standaard*, 25 January 2020

List of books sent to the jurors

1995, *Blote handen* [*Bare Hands*], Querido, NL

2000, *Broere (de oudste, de stilste, de echtste, de verste, de liefste, de snelste en ik)* [*Brother (the Oldest, the Quietest, the Truest, the Farthest, the Loveliest, the Fastest, and Me)*], Querido, NL

2003, *De Schepping* [*The Creation*], Querido, NL – Ill. Wolf Erlbruch

2018, *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* [*Everyone's Sorry Nowadays*], Querido, NL

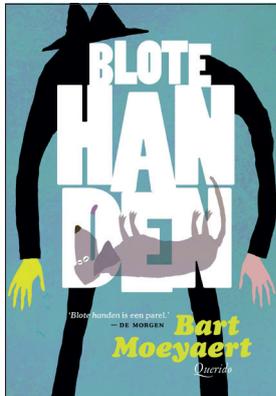
2022, *Morris* [*Morris*], Querido, NL – Ill. Sebastiaan Van Doninck

What's your favourite first sentence and which book does it come from?

My favourite first sentence must come from the bookshelves in my study, because that's where I have the books I want to keep close to me. And of course, I don't want to pick a beautiful first sentence from a book that I don't like. So, I reach for *De eikelvreters* by Els Pelgrom ('We kept the door closed.'). I open *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf ('Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.'). My favourite one today is the first sentence of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: 'Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father.' I see that I like deceptively simple first sentences. In Winterson's case, the tension of her entire story is there in just a handful of words – but you have to read the whole book.

In: *27 questions & answers* (leaflet)

Published reviews of the books submitted to the jury



On *Blote handen* [*Bare Hands*]

Booklist, 15 December 1998 (USA)

Gr. 3-7. Spare and heartfelt, this gripping first-person narrative gives you more than the boy's viewpoint; it seems as if you are right inside his head, feeling what he feels, physically and emotionally. The elemental story, translated from the Dutch, takes place on New Year's Eve in a country village. The boy, Ward, kills a duck that belongs to the village loner, Betjeman, who wants to move in with Ward's mother. The book opens with Betjeman chasing Ward and his best friend through the fields, until, in fury, Betjeman kills Ward's beloved dog. Overwhelmed with grief and anger, Ward hugs his dog to his body; he would just like to rush back home to the comfort of his mother and younger sister, but his friend persuades Ward to get revenge, and the boys make their way to Betjeman's rough farmhouse in search of their prey. As the tension builds to the climactic confrontation, Ward relives his wild jealousy when Betjeman has Christmas dinner with the family. He also admits Betjeman's violence and loneliness and connects them with his own. In fact, in a sense, all the characters are part of Ward. He and his best friend are like 'one pair of shoes,' and his friend pushes him the way he is already going. At the same time, he hears his mother's gentleness, and that is part of him, too. Opposed to his wild jealous anger is the aching tenderness for the dog he loved ('The way he stretched, burying his paws in my pillow'), which he now holds tight against himself. Readers will recognize the intensity of Ward's mixed-up feelings. They will rush to get to the end of the story, and then they will want to talk about it.

Hazel Rochman, starred review

Literair NRC Handelsblad, 29 September 1995 (NL)

We Were One Pair of Shoes: Sensitive and tough story by Bart Moeyaert

How distant the world of children often is from that of adults, much as we might sometimes wish it were otherwise. However hard we, big and small, try to make the world a unified whole, it all too easily falls to pieces. An adult raises his glass, his hair shines, as does his smile, and he says 'Here's to us,' thinking perhaps that he's happy, or about to become so, from now on. But the entire Christmas dinner flies into his lap, the plates, the meat, the gravy, the glasses, and a child

shouts ‘Never!’ The child has seen not a smile but a grin. He has looked in disgust at the man and in disgust at his mother, who is also smiling, and in disgust at his sister with her lemonade. There is no peace and happiness. This is war.

Bart Moeyaert’s book *Bare Hands* is troubling from the very first sentence. Two boys are being followed by an enormous, terrifying man with a plastic hand. It’s Betjeman, raging and cursing, and he’d be quite capable of beating them to death. Many mysterious things are happening. There’s a dead duck, a nervous dog, ditches and barbed wire and barns, and above all this inexplicably hostile man. Slowly everything becomes clear, but the sense of oppression refuses to lift. In fact it gets worse.

The two boys, Ward and Bernie, are friends. ‘We were one pair of shoes. We were safe only if I was with him and he was with me.’ Both have mothers, but Ward’s mother starts to giggle when Betjeman is around and Betjeman beams when he looks at her. The dead duck belongs to Betjeman, the man with the plastic hand, the man who hits things. ‘He hit everything that had a heart in it. What did he care?’ The nervous dog is Elmer, Ward’s dog: ‘In my head Elmer sat next to me. [...] He looked up at me with a smile, because he could do that, smile.’ Elmer is only a small dog. And Betjeman hits very hard.

Bare Hands describes just a few hours in the life of a boy, the last few hours of the last day of the year, perhaps the last few hours of his old life too, because in the new year everything is going to be different. From Ward’s point of view, which is the point of view from which we get to see all the things we’re reading about, that’s a terrible disaster. Not that that’s stated in so many words; things simply impress themselves on the reader. This is a book in which everything happens fairly quietly, just as in some films there’s hardly any dialogue yet despite that, or because of it, your heart pounds as you watch. There’s no air, no way out, only a relentless succession of events.

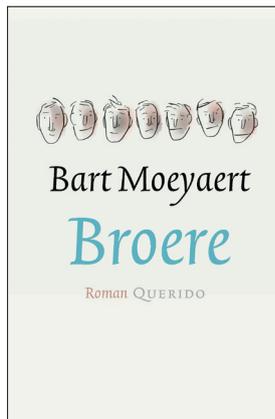
What was so great about Ward’s old life, his life in the time when the world was still whole – life before Betjeman? He doesn’t recall any memories of it. But it’s clear what mothers mean to him. We see that quite quickly in fact. ‘From where we were standing I could hear Bernie’s mother singing. It sounded as if she was enticing me towards the kitchen, because she sang “Peace and Happiness, oh sleep now, I’m with you”. He is desperate to go home, to his own mother, to lean on her for a while. But there’s something that makes that impossible. Or rather someone: ‘You’re not my father.’

It’s possible that Ward’s future stepfather is indeed a loathsome monster. He’s certainly an unpleasant person. He is also, as the mother who befriends him says, a lonely man who perhaps longs to be different. But as soon as he changes, he gets a whole Christmas dinner flung into his lap. Maybe he deserves more understanding than the boy affords him, but that’s not what this is about, the objective truth, or sympathy for a difficult man. What it’s about is a distraught boy whose world is being destroyed by a far too big, far too strong adult. It’s about the horror of being small and powerless, resolute and determined, and meanwhile thinking: ‘I wished Bernie’s mother would stay with me. I needed a pair of arms, preferably around me, more than anything else around me.’

Bart Moeyaert has written nine books and is the winner of a number of Flemish literary awards. Understandably so, since few writers combine such sensitivity with such toughness. *Bare Hands* is a book about two lonely worlds side by side, hopelessly irreconcilable worlds, no matter how much desire there may be for 'Peace and Happiness, oh sleep now, I'm with you'.

Marjoleine de Vos

Translated by Liz Waters



**On Broere (de oudste, de stilste, de echtste, de verste, de liefste, de snelste en ik)
[Brother (the Oldest, the Quietest, the Truest, the Farthest, the Loveliest, the Fastest, and Me)]**

School Library Journal, January 2008 (USA)

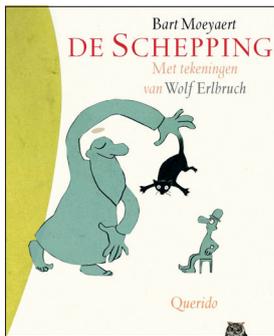
Gr 6 Up – This candid first-person memoir evokes the innocence, imagination, and gullibility of youth. Moeyaert’s short vignettes, none longer than four pages, tell of his experiences as the youngest of seven brothers growing up in Belgium in the late 1960s and ‘70s. Conveyed in the sparest of prose, the day-to-day drama and adventures present the sweet, pungent, and poignant tale of life in a large family. When mother is hospitalized, a woman comes in to lend a hand. When she sets the boys to cutting up scrap fabric, their freedom gone, they begin to grouse, “We counted the days. We glowered at the help from under our eyebrows and made it clear with our bodies what we thought of her. We let the corners of our mouths droop, we hunched our backs, we pulled in our stomachs – that was what we thought of her.” Later the woman unveils a patchwork quilt that the boys unwittingly helped to make for their mother’s homecoming. Tucked within the charming misadventures and misconceptions of the “littlest one” is the finely tuned perfection of language. This is a careful translation in which nothing seems lost, and what is gained is the appreciation of a fresh, original voice.

Alison Follos, North Country School, Lake Placid, NY.

La Libre Belgique, 3rd April 2009 (B)

Savoureuse chronique familiale, *Frères* affiche à la fois une couleur flamande et universelle. Le nouveau roman de Bart Moeyaert respire, en effet, l'enfance, la tartine, l'œuf dur et la barre de chocolat des jours d'excursion, les bêtises familiales, la fraternité et les peurs à retardement. Car celui qui manque à table est peut-être resté enterré dans la fosse en sable... Avec son humour parfois proche de celui de Gosciny dans *Le Petit Nicolas*, son désir de transmettre et de témoigner, Bart Moeyaert, auteur d'une trentaine de livres très appréciés en Flandre, se raconte avec pudeur, simplicité et détachement. Benjamin d'une famille de sept enfants - ce qui lui valut d'avoir le roi Baudouin pour parrain, d'aller dans les cabines des filles à la plage, d'être toujours le plus mignon mais également de se faire mener au bateau - , il nous séduit avec ces 42 récits venus rappeler combien faire partie d'une bande de frères, ce n'est pas rien...

L.B.



On De Schepping [The Creation]

Revista Babar (E)

Nos encontramos ante un libro álbum de edición muy cuidada. Imaginemos que estamos en el primer día de la Creación: lo primero que se hizo fue la luz. Este libro es una confabulación de claro-oscuros. Las ilustraciones de Wolf Erlbruch iluminan/aclaran el oscuro texto de Bart Moeyaert. Lo único que molesta, a mi parecer, son ciertos adornos en la tipografía, repartidos aleatoriamente a lo largo del texto. Pero nos falta el original para comprobar si no nos estamos equivocando para hacer esta valoración. Aunque desde hace algunos años se viene experimentando con la tipografía, rara es la ocasión en que el resultado es completamente satisfactorio. ¿Por qué? Porque queda reducido a un mero adorno carente de significado para el lector, no se trata de una llave que nos facilitara algún tipo de incursión más profunda en las entrañas del libro.

Este libro álbum es realmente un delicioso ejercicio de imaginación. Es un doble reto: por un lado, sólo cuando consigas hacer desaparecer muchas cosas, incluso a tu propia madre, lograrás imaginarte cómo es la nada, y por otro, después de este esfuerzo, volver a ubicar en esa nada a Dios, al protagonista y encima, por ejemplo, una silla, para esperar más cómodamente a que ocurra algo. Porque sin los personajes, las cosas: ¿de qué se podría hablar? ¿Qué se puede expresar sin conceptos, sin palabras? La nada al mismo tiempo es algo muy simple, pero terriblemente complicado. Hagamos un esfuerzo, intentemos imaginarnos la presencia de una nada voraz y al mismo tiempo plana, la que todo engulle y nada contiene. Comprobaremos que nuestra imaginación merma con los años. Quiero creer, estoy prácticamente segura, de que aunque esté en juego la propia madre (referencia esencial durante muchos años), se trata de un ejercicio mucho más fácil para los niños: «Si quieres ver el principio de las cosas, debes hacer desaparecer muchas cosas. Incluso a tu madre».

Un discurso inteligente, poético, nada superfluo ni facilón (aunque complicado, oscuro y críptico para niños) y desde una perspectiva muy actual contrasta con las imágenes sencillas, luminosas, de trazo etéreo que se concretan cuando van apareciendo los objetos tangibles de las manos de Dios. Sencillas, sí, pero magistrales; Wolf Erlbruch se atreve con inmensas páginas blancas en las que sitúa sus ilustraciones mínimamente coloreadas. Naturalmente esta situación va cambiando según la nada desaparece bajo el mundo material, pero aún así, el blanco es el telón de fondo de su imaginario.

Sus ilustraciones de trazo muy simple son tremendamente expresivas. Uno no deja de asombrarse cuando vuelve a constatar lo expresivo que puede ser un simple trazo, el significado que puede tener una línea... Fruto de esta expresividad son unos personajes terriblemente simpáticos: justo en la frontera genial del cliché, en el mejor de los sentidos, y la firma del autor. No nos extraña su apariencia y, al mismo tiempo, son ilustraciones vivas, con carisma, frescura y originalidad. El texto de Bart Moeyaert es otra delicia que te deja volando en un extraño lugar en el que confluye lo sabido, lo que ya hemos leído con anterioridad y una nueva perspectiva, la de un ser humano actual e inconformista, un hombre

desnudo y con sombrero. Su misión: la Creación como espectáculo precisa de un público, un espectador. Un hombre consciente de su pequeñez en el universo y que, aún así, se enfada por ser un mero espectador, orgullo herido al ver hay alguien más poderoso que él. Nuestro Dios es parco en palabras, es un obrante, operante, la acción más allá del pensamiento. Es humano en su cansancio al séptimo día, cae rendido, se queda dormido como un bebé. Es divino en su capacidad de disfrutar de su obra. Es simple y prepotente al mismo tiempo.

Lo que más nos extraña de esta visión moderna de la Creación es el desencante. ¿Pero podíamos esperar otro? ¿En el título no leemos claramente dos palabras: La Creación? El desencanto y el disgusto de nuestro hombrecito con bombín desaparecen cuando recibe a su compañera, al otro igual a su naturaleza que necesita para poder disfrutar de la Creación, una mujer con la que poder compartir y así matar la propia soledad. ¿Machista? Simplemente la esencia cultural de lo que es la Creación, pero nos choca mucho más después de haber volado en significados más libres. De hecho, la mujer que surge es de un rojo tierra, el color más fuerte de todo el álbum.

Un álbum interesante. Nos abre signos de interrogación, nos deleita... ¿Como único álbum en nuestra estantería? No lo creo, le falta una vuelta de tuerca para ser uno de esos álbumes más representativos y esplendorosos. Y al niño tendremos que guiarle entre las palabras, con las imágenes no será necesario...

Moka Seco Reeg

NRC Handelsblad, 26th September 2003 (NL)

Bananas on God's nose



Bart Moeyaert on stage. Performance of *De Schepping*, 20 September 2020
© Peter Lodder

Seldom was God so amiable, so serene and at the same time so unfathomable as in illustrator Wolf Erlbruch's interpretation in this stunningly beautiful picture book for all ages, but most particularly for children from six years: *Creation*. Rare too is the way in which text and images go together in this book, a new text which Bart Moeyaert wrote for an adaptation of Haydn's oratorio *Die Schöpfung*, commissioned by the Dutch Wind Ensemble. The interpretation has been performed various times since then, next autumn it will be performed several times more, but now there's the book too. And if desired, a special edition with CD.

Moeyaert's genius is apparent from the first page. His personal Genesis begins thus: "In the beginning there was nothing. It's hard for you to imagine that. Everything that exists now has not to exist yet. You have to turn out the light, not be there yourself, and then forget all the dark too, because in the beginning there was nothing, not even dark. If you want to see the beginning of everything you must blank out a lot. Even your mother."

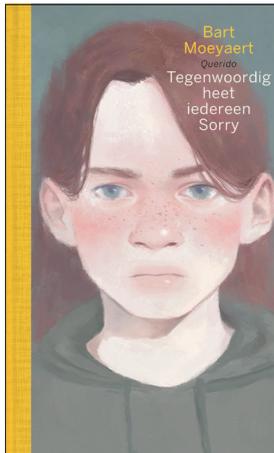
The mother gives this passage light and humor, but mainly demonstrates Moeyaert's ability to see the world through a child's eyes, without instantly reverting to strained coziness. 'In the beginning was my mother', of course, it takes a person years to get past this thought. In the accompanying illustration, mum is shown inching out of the bottom of the image. You can no longer see her head. Erlbruch has drawn an archetypal mother's body, with slippers, a tartan skirt, an apron and, the most important of course: an obligingly proffered tray with a glass of something. Milk, probably. Or squash.

Moeyaert sustains his powerful narrative manner right to the end. The dialogues between God and the I figure are each worth quoting. God with his large eyes closed and his practically triumphant halo is very pleased at the prospect of His Works. He is a stranger to doubt. The first thing He creates is daytime: "I only realized a few hours later, when it got dark." God sticks up his thumb. But apart from God, Moeyaert's other characters do wrestle with things. The I figure in *Creation* soon suffers from being human. "Why did you first make light, and only later the sun? Shouldn't it have been the other way round? Shouldn't it have been simultaneous?" [...] 'I could have slapped myself. What began as a well-meant question, suddenly twisted. My saliva was venom.'

These changes of mood are elegantly portrayed by illustrator Erlbruch. The blasé leaning back of the I figure, a little man with a bowler hat, the grimness of the thin line of his mouth all of a sudden, says it all. The uniqueness of Erlbruch's forms is that they are at once robust and graceful. He combines different types of paper and techniques, from paper cutting to painting, to clear compositions with instant appeal, but which on further inspection convey everything. When Moeyaert writes that "everything [...] grew and budded and blossomed," Erlbruch fills the page with diverging forms and lines. All of a sudden, three bananas balance on the tip of God's nose.

Judith Eiselin

Translated by Michele Hutchison



On Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry [Everyone's sorry nowadays]

De Standaard, 5 October 2018 (B)

In the shadow of brother dearest

Bart Moeyaert last had a novel for children published in 2011. *Everyone's Sorry Nowadays* was worth the wait.

It might be the most beautiful cover image of the year: the child staring at you from the front of Bart Moeyaert's new book, created by the Korean illustrator JangMyeong Uk. Her name is Bianca, but she prefers to be called Perdón. "Perdón is a very old name that's hardly ever used anymore," she explains. "Everyone's Sorry nowadays." After just a few sentences of the book, you find out that Bianca is "unmanageable", which is why her father has decided that she can't come over to stay the weekend with him and his girlfriend quite as often. But the cover tells a different story: the story of a child who is not just moody but also vulnerable – a girl who forces you to look at her, even though the expression on her face is simultaneously trying to repel you.

Everyone's Sorry Nowadays tells the story of a day in Bianca's life. The story begins at lunch, but Bianca hints via flashbacks that she's done something that morning that she's starting to regret. The reason why Bianca sometimes hides and sometimes lashes out is clear right from the beginning, when she describes her brother: "There's an exclamation mark on Alan's bare chest." That exclamation mark is an indication not only of the operations on his heart, but also of the way Alan constantly monopolizes their mum's attention. Bianca feels as if she is living in the shadow of her sick brother.

For the rest of the day, the tension in the family slowly but surely builds up. Bianca's mum has prepared a surprise: a friend of Alan's is coming to play, and this friend's mum is Billie King, an actress in a soap opera that Bianca watches every day. While everyone tries to make a positive impression on Billie, the reader can already guess that the afternoon is going to get out of hand – the only question is how. And how far will Bianca dare to go to demand attention and to vent her anger?

Subtle hints

Bart Moeyaert has already proved himself a master at building up tension and minutely dissecting painful situations, in books such as *Blote handen* (published in English as *Bare Hands*) and *Het is de liefde die we niet begrijpen* (published in English as *It's Love We Don't Understand*). He does not idealize childhood and his protagonists choose to rebel, both with their language and with actions that don't always achieve the desired effect. Bianca seems awkward rather than unmanageable. But she has a talent for reading situations and picking up subtle hints. This results in many astute observations, which are described in a visual

and evocative way. For example, after a conversation between Bianca's mum and a yelling neighbour: "As the door closes, my mum's big smile becomes thinner and thinner and thinner too, until there's nothing left of it." Bianca's observations also lead to a lot of frustration though, as she focuses mainly on other people's flaws.

Picking up subtle hints is what Moeyaert expects from his readers too. As always, his use of language is remarkably subtle and many of the most important things are left unsaid. Just as Bianca hides from her family, she does not reveal all of her secrets to the reader either. Acting is a theme that runs throughout the book. "I take a step forward. I am a different, nicer girl from that child who was here a moment ago," Bianca notes when she goes to talk to Billie King. This change of mood also applies to the way she tells her story. Whether Bianca is making things up or they actually happened can also be a guessing game at times.

Reading and rereading

Among all the frustration and tension, Moeyaert also blows a necessary breath of fresh air. This can be seen partly in the familiarity of the situations: Alan making the paddling pool overflow by pushing its side down, the Capri-Suns that Bianca keeps for herself, the game of Operation and the storylines from the soap opera. The absurd humour also frequently serves to relieve the tension. Bianca, for instance, describes her own situation as follows: "In my instruction manual, it says that I'm sometimes really happy, but you can't always tell by looking at me. If I come downstairs slowly, one step at a time and with a bit of a bump, then it's possible that I'm actually very happy inside." A little later, a surreal conversation takes place as Bianca sits down with Billie King and asks her: "How do you die?" Because she's read that Billie's character is going to die in December. The actress explains that she can't say anything because of a clause in her contract: "I'm going to have to be careful not to spill the beans – until the day I die."

Bart Moeyaert last had a children's book published in 2011: *De melkweg* (*The Milky Way*). *Everyone's Sorry Nowadays* has had a long time to mature and does not give away all of its beauty upon the first reading. Reading the book slowly and then rereading it reveals just how closely all the elements of the story are interconnected and what a good balance the author has found between tension and release, fury and cautious joy, revealing and concealing. It was worth the wait.

Vanessa Joosen

Translated by Laura Watkinson

Tzum: literair weblog, 21 October 2018 (NL and B)

A girl who should have come with an instruction manual

Barely one week after its publication date, a second edition of *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* was already on the cards and the translation rights for the French and German markets had already been sold. Another indication that Bart Moeyaert's latest novel has once again succeeded in reaching a wide and diverse readership.

The intriguing cover image was created by Jang Myeong Uk, a Korean artist whom Moeyaert met a few years ago through Instagram. The protagonist Bianca stares back at readers. At first glance, she seems to be seizing us up with her self-conscious gaze. But look again and you'll also notice her vulnerability, and her sheer bottomless sorrow. The storyline explains why. Bianca is no longer welcome every week at her father's place, where his new girlfriend Cruz has moved in, because they find her 'unruly'. Bianca's mother says she's the kind of girl who should have come with an instruction manual. Bianca is less severe on herself, although she wishes she could 'mute' her thoughts more often. She doesn't just feel rejected by her father. Her brother Alan, who has had three heart surgeries, is the object of all their mother's love and affection. Or in any event, that's Bianca's take, as the focaliser, because all we have to go on is her obviously biased view of events.

Seven years after the publication of *De Melkweg* (2011), Moeyaert presents his readers with yet another small, intimate story, the type of story that we have come to expect from him. He eschews grand gestures, preferring instead to give his readers a detailed insight into (disrupted) family relations, a recurring theme in his oeuvre, which continues to surprise and enthrall readers. His books revolve around the often-complicated relationship between parents and their children, because this relationship is far from obvious. Nor is the child presented as an 'innocent creature' in his narratives. Bianca, who is a talented observer, is quick to realise that Alan has a whole arsenal of tricks up his sleeve to get what he wants.

'One thing he likes to do is to want something that his mother doesn't have. He knows that she'll feel guilty and say, 'I'm sorry, sweetheart' and will be extra nice to him'.

Bianca serves as a keen observer of moods, thoughts, and emotions, for which she often uses the customary descriptions: 'Mum spots a hole in the sky and sticks a text bubble in it'.

But Bianca also has her shortcomings, something of which she is all too aware. She regularly skulks off to her secret hiding place, to be alone with her thoughts. And there's also the fact that she cuts herself out of family photos. An admittedly rash decision that she'll come to regret later, for which she will apologise most sincerely. Such insight, such growing awareness, within such a limited time frame: that is one heck of an evolution. The catalyst for this is the visit of Alan's friend, Jazz – 'His name takes all of three seconds to pronounce' – and his mother Billie King, who happens to be a famous actress, and one of the stars of Bianca's

favourite soap series ‘*Hier bij ons* [*Here at our place*]’. Initially Bianca is reluctant to become friends, but when Billie calls her a ‘remarkable’ girl and takes a genuine interest in her, a cautious rapprochement ensues.

Communication, and in particular how laborious it can sometimes be, is another recurring theme in Moeyaert’s oeuvre, which is once again very well developed. After Billie’s introduction, the novel evolves at a relatively leisurely pace, although the author uses these passages to give subtle hints about what is yet to come: ‘Nothing will ever be the same’, we are told. And Bianca also stresses repeatedly that she longs for the freedom to say and do as she wants. Another soap actress suddenly turns up, namely Malika, Billie’s partner. The new character does not add much to the storyline, although to Moeyaert’s credit, he treats the relationship as a matter of course, as in his previous work. This was not always the case in (children’s) literature in the past.

Billie’s life in the soap series is shaped by a sequence of unexpected turns, unlike Bianca’s life. In between the lines, Bianca does however notice a cautious overlap. Billie’s half-sister is written out of the series after just six weeks, because of her lack of popularity. ‘Finished. Eliminated. Kicked out. Everything sounds terrible but being cast off sounds the worst’. The parallels with her own situation are remarkable as Bianca has also been erased from the life of her father and ‘his Cruz’. Bianca, however, will also have to nail her colours to the mast. When the neighbours unknowingly demolish her ‘hideout’, they unwittingly force an opening to the future. She explains this with a phrase taken from interview with Billie, a message that her father took quite literally:

‘Yes’, Dad said. ‘When you do something, you either do it all from scratch. Or you don’t. There’s no such thing as a half-done job.’

The fact that such an innocuous phrase would go on to have such far-reaching consequences for the family constellation is only revealed at the end of the novel. The result is an open ending, although Moeyaert is cautiously hopeful about the future this time around.

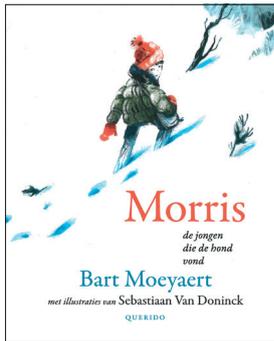
Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry consists of short chapters, in some instances of nothing more than an observation, a thought, or even a snapshot. Moeyaert formulates them in succinct sentences, strictly measuring his words. The many dialogues are also very condensed: Moeyaert says more with fewer words, in a very suggestive style. While this has been the author’s trademark for many years, this time he goes one step further; thoughts and observations are often placed in between backslashes in an attempt to strip language of any ballast and approximate Bianca’s thoughts which seem to fan out in every direction: “She loves to build up any question she asks me.

I am the beginning / the one to blame / the problem.”

After a few hectic years, in which Moeyaert served as artistic intendant of the 2016 Frankfurter Buchmesse, he has once again found the peace and quiet he needed to write an extremely intimate and intense novel. *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* has had lots of time to mature, as you can tell on almost every page. I can only recommend that you get to know Bianca; I guarantee that it’s an encounter you won’t easily forget.

Jürgen Peeters

Translated by Sandy Logan



On Morris [Morris]

Trouw, 08 October 2022 (NL)

A superb winter novel

Bart Moeyaert has woven a beautiful, grim, winter story that ends with pear cake and chocolate milk, on a note of hope.

However small Bart Moeyaert's stories may be, they always conceal big emotions. Take his previous book, *Tegenwoordig heet iedereen Sorry* (Zilveren Griffel award), which unfolds on a sweltering summer day, in just one place: around the house of Bianca who is angry and is considered unruly, but who is merely struggling with her parents' divorce and all the attention that her sick brother is getting.

The experiences of the protagonist of his newly published, superb winter novel are concealed under a dense layer of snow, interspersed with the odd open space: poignant, often moving sentences that suggest warring parents, who have perhaps abandoned the child, but in which this misery is never explicitly voiced. Moeyaert writes for attentive readers, who don't need a snow shovel to spot the underlying layer. No wonder that so many adults love his work.

Morris has temporarily moved in with this grandmother who lives in a mountain village because sad things have happened. They barely discuss these events, but his gran calls him Superman, which helps. 'When you have a name, you exist more than without one, and some names give you broad shoulders'.

Granny's dog Houdini is named after the escape king for a reason, because it somehow always manages to break out. Morris has no choice but to walk up the mountain to find him.

During one of these searches, the boy is suddenly caught up in a snowstorm and the following telling sentences drift past: 'The sob was a leftover from last night. When you cry in secret, you can never have a good cry', 'Morris thought what he often thought: that everything always changes, just when you don't want it to' and 'When you close your eyes, you sometimes see too much'. In his case: a falling table lamp, a vase in a thousand fragments, a door that is slammed shut. We don't need more to experience Morris's sadness.

The tension due to the snowstorm is also palpable. Will Morris and Houdini make it home unharmed? And the encounter with a dangerous ram and its keeper, a 'wild' boy, whom Morris fights but in whom he also recognises himself.

The grim, cold story ends on a hopeful note, with pear cake and chocolate milk. But that is not the only reason why it's such a riveting read (aloud) for Christmas. In his illustrations, Sebastiaan Van Doninck succeeds in capturing both spheres: vibrant yellow and oranges punctuate the snowy, blue-green mountain setting, in which the freezing cold is almost palpable.

Bas Maliepaard

Translated by Sandy Logan

NRC, 23 September 2022 (NL)

Suddenly the dog seemed even more lost

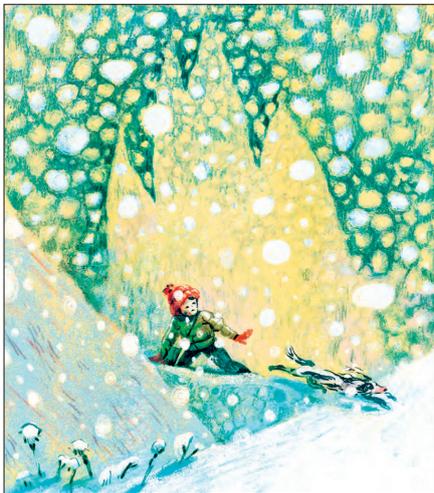
‘Morris’, about a boy and his runaway dog, is a flawless tale about a child’s sorrow.

‘He let out one sob. Just the one. It was a leftover from last night. When you cry in secret, you can never have a good cry.’ This quote from Bart Moeyaert’s new children’s book *Morris* is all you need to understand what the winner of the 2019 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award excels at: using just a few words to express a whole lot of emotions. You can immediately sense that *Morris*, who is seven years old, is grappling with great sorrow. Just don’t expect Moeyaert to reveal the cause: he never explains what exactly happened and why the boy lives with his grandmother and her runaway dog Houdini. But that doesn’t mean that *Morris*’s sorrow does not play a part in this story.

The plot is easy. When Houdini escapes yet again to the nearby mountain, *Morris* sets out in search of him. He finds the dog. On the way back to the cottage, it starts to snow hard, ‘as if a trap door had been opened in the clouds’. While thick snowflakes fill the air, *Morris* attempts to find his way home. The lively dog takes advantage of the opportunity to disappear in the snow.

Moeyaert does an excellent job of outlining how abandoned the child feels in succinct sentences without (false) adult emotions shining through. The scene in which *Morris* calls Houdini is extremely moving: ‘His echo gently resonated through the valley. As if others were looking for Houdini on some other snowy mountains. While this seemed funny at first, it wasn’t, the more he thought about it. Suddenly the dog suddenly seemed even more lost.’ Also excellent: the tense moment in which *Morris* suddenly finds himself face to muzzle with a colossal ram and a wild-looking boy who challenges him. ‘His heart was that of a hare’, but, Moeyaert adds tellingly, ‘*Morris* remained silent. Because when you remain silent, you almost disappear.’

At first glance, *Morris* is like your typical Moeyaert child, a somewhat lonely boy who is lost in a world that is cold, both literally and figuratively speaking. But when the two boys are forced to seek shelter together and wait for the storm to blow over, he shows unexpected courage. While *Morris* doesn’t have a ram, he does have a dog and how do we know that Houdini isn’t dangerous? Moreover, he soon realises that his companion is not any better off. The boy is hungry and has a father who blames him for everything. Moeyaert describes, with great sensitivity, in keeping with a child’s perspective, how the boys cautiously come to an unspoken agreement. Meanwhile, he also gives subtle hints about the cause of *Morris*’s sadness. When the boy mentions his horrible father, *Morris* thinks: ‘But at least, you get to do something with your dad.’



The lively dog takes advantage of the opportunity to disappear in the snow.
Ill. by Sebastiaan Van Doninck

Morris is more than an aptly described, detailed snapshot of a child's life. This little winter adventure is also genuinely thrilling. Will Morris be reunited with Houdini? And who is Randy Pek, the mysterious man who visits Morris's grandmother all the time?

In addition to adding to the overall ambience, Sebastiaan Van Doninck's enchanting winter illustrations also add narrative elements. The giant ram, with legs like pine tree trunks, which emerges from the winter forest causes the reader to wonder whether Morris did not just imagine the ram. The illustration in which the child comes face to face with Randy Pek is equally suggestive: the man's head is bowed, just like the top of the snowy pine behind him, whereas Morris bravely gazes up at him. Will all end well? One thing is certain: *Morris* is among Moeyaert's best work.

Mirjam Noorduijn

Translated by Sandy Logan

Writing gives me the comfort to weigh my words and to say, 'This is what I am capable of now'. Next year that will be slightly different, but this is the best for now. I have learned to be at peace with that. What I have also taught myself is to let go of perfection. Perfection is boring. In that respect, I have started practising the middle finger.

'The questions of Proust'

Interview with Bart Moeyaert by Ann Jooris,
in *De Morgen*, 4 April 2022

